

Resisting the Culture of Schooling Series — I

# EXPOSING THE ILLUSION OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION

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Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute  
for Rethinking Education and Development

*Exposing the Illusion of the Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education*  
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The 'Resisting the Culture of Schooling Series' is dedicated to highlighting various ways in which people are creatively struggling against dehumanizing and exploitative Education and Development/Globalization. It will feature essays, stories, poems, dramas, art, music, etc. in a number of languages (Mewari, Hindi, English). To learn more about or to contribute to the series, please contact Shikshantar.

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# THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION (AND OUR CRITIQUES OF THEM)

1. We have a panacea for all our socio-economic ills and it is EDUCATION.

*In the face of growing violence, inequity and poverty, environmental catastrophe, widespread exploitation, finite resources and the massive consumer needs of the North, a blind faith in education as schooling should be suspect.*

2. Schooling is said to increase every individual's life chances.

*Schools demean individuals full potential, their diversity, creativities, intelligences, learning styles, knowledges, languages, etc. Nor can schooling guarantee employment in today's cut-throat, competitive world.*

3. One only needs to work hard to succeed in school.

*The 'head start' is greatest for those who have paid most for their academic degrees.*

4. Schooling breaks down class barriers and encourages tolerance.

*Schooling reinforces many of the oppressive structural aspects of society and generates dehumanizing fear and competition.*

5. Schooling is said to be an empowering process.

*Schooling prevents individuals and collectives from challenging and changing the macro-level System and its micro-level manifestations to create better worlds for humanity.*

6. "We see these problems, but we advocate for *good quality schools*. alternatives."

*Alternative schools still perpetuate the oppressive and selective model of Development and Progress.*

7. The Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education promises equality, justice, peace, and democracy through universal elementary education.

*The Campaign presumes that all Indians require a system of schooling in order to live with dignity, and does not recognize schooling as a violation of human dignity.*

8. The Campaign is fighting on behalf of the people, who desire education for all.

*The Campaign undermines local dialogues on urgent foundational questions by distracting our attention, energy, and resources and by trying to shove a prescriptive, closed agenda down our throats. It benefits those who thrive on the schooling industry.*

9. Education is a universal, human right that every country's government must ensure.

*Though it tries to stand on a moral high ground, Education is a Big Business, driven by a nexus of State-Market-NGOs-Academia, who profit greatly from the proliferation of schooling and who disregard human diversity and human dignity.*

10. Without Education, there cannot be Development and Progress.

*The dominant model of Development and Progress dehumanizes the world's social majorities and destroys the webs of life and living wisdoms. To paraphrase Gandhiji, something must be horribly wrong with a system of Education that fails to question, challenge, and change this Model.*

# ALL THAT GLITTERS IS GOLD??!?: THE MYTHS ENSHRINED IN THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

*Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.*

*Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.*

*Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.*

— Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

*The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.*

— Article 45, Directive Principles of State Policy,  
Constitution of India - Part IV, 1950

*After a child completes 14 years, his or her right to education is circumscribed by the limits of the economic capacity of the State and its development.*

— Article 41, Directive Principles of State Policy,  
Constitution of India - Part IV, 1950

*State parties shall promote and encourage international co-operation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. ...particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.*

— Article 28, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

We recognise that the aspirations and development goals of our countries can be fulfilled only by assuring education to all our people, a right promised both in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the constitutions and law of each of our countries.

— Education for All Summit Of Nine High-Population Countries,  
Delhi Declaration, December 1993

The costs of educational deprivation are incalculable. Denial of the right to basic education undermines efforts to reduce child and maternal mortality, to improve public health and nutrition, and to strengthen opportunities for more secure and productive livelihoods. Democracy and good governance cannot flourish in a situation where large sections of the population are excluded from participation as a result of illiteracy...investment in education is the key to more rapid and more equitable growth upon which sustained poverty reduction depends.

— Education International, The Global Action Plan for Education, March 2000

*Education is at the heart of development.*

— DFID, Education For All — The Challenge of Universal Primary Education, March 2000

*Education is a fundamental right of every person; a key to other human rights; the heart of all development; the essential prerequisite for equity, diversity and lasting peace.*

— World Education Forum, Education For All: All For Education, A Framework for Action, Dakar, April 2000

*Both 'lifelong education' and 'lifelong learning' have come to represent in different ways the expectations that societies now have of education and of the scope that should be provided for every individual to develop his or her potential.*

— UNESCO, The Right to Education: World Education Report,  
2000

## INTRODUCTION: EXPOSING THE ILLUSION

In all of the above pronouncements, one message is clear: We have a panacea for our socio-economic ills and it is EDUCATION. This *akshayapatram*<sup>1</sup> has the power to eradicate poverty, eliminate gender/racial discrimination, protect against violations of the individual, prevent environmental degradation, halt escalating rates of population growth, resolve health and livelihood problems, ensure tolerance and justice, promote democracy and development, and maintain human dignity. So potent is education that it is decreed a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. From this, one can infer that universalizing education will lead to liberty, equality, justice and peace for all.

Notably, in all these claims, the unwritten, underlying assumption is that 'education' equals schooling.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in most internationally ratified conventions, an individual's (or family's) choice of kind of education, outside of schooling, is acceptable only if it conforms to "minimum educational standards, as laid down or approved by competent authorities" (read: Education is only that which is State-defined.)<sup>3</sup> These pronouncements have effectively declared schooling to be the only (and most supreme) means of education. Thus, in essence, schooling is being declared a Human Right. Or, in the case of India, there is a move to make it a Fundamental Right in the Constitution.

The notion of Human/Fundamental Rights itself grows out of a particular sense of human dignity, one based upon protecting

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<sup>1</sup> In the Mahabharata, the *akshayapatram* is a divine vessel that can produce as much food as one desires, thus able to satisfy all hunger needs. It was given by Krishna to the Pandavas while they were in exile.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), it expressly states that "the development of a system of schools at all levels shall be actively pursued" in response to declaring a right to education at primary, secondary, and higher levels.

<sup>3</sup> "The Right To Education: Towards Education For All Throughout Life," World Education Report 2000, UNESCO.

individuals and their property vis-à-vis the State, the Market, and each other.<sup>4</sup> This idea of 'rights' has achieved prominence today, because of a proliferation of the modern institutions it emerges from (i.e. the Nation-State, industrial economy, etc.) and because of the materialistic vision of Progress and Success it corresponds to (which is part and parcel of these institutions). Since schooling is dependent upon these modern institutions, and since it professes to deliver such Progress, it can 'naturally' be considered a Human Right. Underlying this assumption is the belief that schooling is the only way that every human being can freely avail of the fruits of Development.<sup>5</sup>

For three centuries now, there seems to have been an 'international consensus' on the magical, transformative potential of schooling, given its notable role in both building modern European nation-states and in intensifying their colonial enterprises. Over the last 50 years, mass schooling (formal and non-formal) has figured prominently in the various nation-building exercises of developing countries. In the Project of Third World Development, for example, schooling and literacy have been universally accepted as reliable, rational, verifiable and significant "development indicators." Moreover, across the political spectrum, both the Left and Right

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of rights emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, out of the Enlightenment discourse of Europeans like Rousseau, Locke, and Hobbes, who were interested in developing the individual, protecting his property and protecting him from tyranny by the State. Their ideas were embedded in the constitutions of the UK, France, and the US, which themselves inspired the Indian Constitution. However, the modern conception of Human Rights grows out of WWII, when these three areas were violated – body, property, and State. WWII gave birth to the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For more history on the 'rights' discourse, see Theories of Rights (1984) and Human Wrongs (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this article, we capitalize terms like Development, Education, the System, Human Rights, etc. We use capital letters because we are referring specifically to those modern frameworks that emerged out of Euro-American philosophy, history, experience, etc. and that today compose the mainstream reference points for relating, organizing, living, etc. We recognize that people may ascribe other meanings to these terms, but we very consciously use them to signify the dominant colonizing perspective. (See Sachs, ed, 1992; Rahnema, ed, 1997; Shiva, 1993).

alike are reiterating the formula that schooling is a prerequisite for Development. Political energy, along with large amounts of (borrowed) money, has been spent on the education system's infrastructure and salaries, to try to make this formula work. Today, in the mounting panic that Progress remains a mirage for the social majorities of the world, schooling has again emerged — like an oasis in the desert — to become a major issue on international and national agendas.

For over a decade, international campaigns for universalizing education<sup>6</sup> in developing countries have highlighted priority areas of school access, equity, and quality, or school enrollment, retention and completion for all (adult and child). However, most governments have been unable to meet these targets, despite the aid of international donor agencies, private sector groups, and local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Now, in India, the 'international consensus' is being re-echoed in the ongoing "Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education," steered by the National Alliance for Education as a Fundamental Right.<sup>7</sup> The Alliance draws its mandate from the Indian Constitution and from current international campaigns (like Education for All) that are promoting the right to universal, compulsory schooling. In the Campaign, NGOs have joined hands with self-proclaimed

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the Education For All (EFA) campaign, imposed by UNESCO, UNFPA, UNDP, UNICEF and the World Bank, has been underway for the last decade. The first world conference on EFA was held in Jomtein, Thailand, in 1990 and the second at Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000. In Dakar, a review of a decade's commitment to universalization concluded with the reaffirmation of the goals put together at Jomtein and an extension of the deadline for achievement to 2015. The review criteria remained quantitative and statistical, focussing on school access, retention and literacy rates.

<sup>7</sup> The lead sponsors of the Campaign include: Aga Khan Foundation, Bodh, CRY, ICICI, MV Foundation, National Foundation for India, National Law School of India University, Pratham, PRIA, UNICEF, Campaign against Child Labour, Jan Adhikar Manch, Samarthan, Jan Morcha, Voice of Partners, West Bengal Education Network (WBEN), Forum Against Child Exploitation, Delhi Bal Adhikar Manch, Andhra Pradesh Alliance for Child Rights (APACR)...

philanthropic corporations to ensure that the State will no longer drag its feet in achieving universal schooling for all.

Citing poor quality as the new culprit, the Campaign's strategy includes altering the existing schooling structure in favor of non-formal or alternative school reform initiatives, in addition to expanding access/enrollment. According to them, reforms for qualitatively superior schooling means increasing supplies of what already exists — more and "better" teachers, trainers, curriculum, infrastructure, textbooks, uniforms, slates and chalk, etc. — which can conveniently be purchased from the 'socially sensitive' corporate sector. This reform strategy demands greater expenditure and therefore more resources. Thus, the need of the hour is portrayed as immediate relief from resource crunches — via debt relief and grants from global donors and corporate organizations — so that developing countries, like India, can more easily buy good quality education for all. What is being pushed is a State-Market-NGO nexus that claims to be serving the good of humanity.

However, in the face of growing violence, inequity and poverty, environmental catastrophe, widespread exploitation, finite resources and the massive consumer needs of the North,<sup>8</sup> a blind faith in the empowering potential of schooling should be suspect. In fact, an analysis of global exploitative regimes and transnational socioeconomic dynamics reveals a covert but conscious effort by the North to retain and expand its control over the 'fruits of Development'. Schooling supports this effort to re-colonize by providing a 'neutral' veil behind which the North can pursue its dehumanizing and destructive agenda. In this paper, we seek to contest the prevalent notions of the Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education by advancing the following arguments:

(1) *The culture of schooling<sup>9</sup> is a violation of our human dignity*

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<sup>8</sup> North refers to so-called "Developed countries" as well as the elite of the "Developing countries".

<sup>9</sup> We must clarify between 'schools' as physical spaces and the 'culture of schooling', which encompasses an entire set of aspirations, attitudes, beliefs, relationships, goals

(where dignity is a concept much more broadly understood than that in the narrow discourse on 'rights').

- (2) *The Campaign mode undermines regenerative local dialogues on urgent foundational questions by distracting our attention, energy and resources and by trying to shove a prescriptive/closed agenda down our throats.*
- (3) *The human rights agenda is inextricably linked to a vision of Development and Globalization that fundamentally violates pluralistic notions of human dignity and human life. As Wolfgang Sachs has aptly described, "There is only one thing worse than the failure of conventional development: namely, its untrammeled success."<sup>10</sup>*

By exploring these three arguments in detail, we hope to encourage others to reflect on the Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education. At the end of this paper, therefore, we offer a few questions for discussion, which will hopefully further enhance the questioning, dialogue, and action necessary for re-considering one's understanding of and involvement with the Campaign.

We would also like to make it clear that we are not pro-market technophiles, trying to 'deprive the poor' of their due. Nor are we anti-state naxalites, who seek to 'blow up' the world. (Unfortunately, these categories have been created by people who are invested in the State, to allow them to hold their moral and intellectual ground and thereby silence debate.) Nor, in criticizing schooling, are we

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and processes. We welcome the idea of people of different ages coming together in a place to learn something. However, schools today rarely provide an opportunity for this to happen in a meaningful way. Instead they are dominated by a 'culture of schooling,' in which labels, ranks, competitions, teaching hierarchies, disconnected and de-contextualized knowledge, stratification, and other forms of rote surface learning take precedence over developing full human potential, of either individuals or collectives. Schooling also prioritizes Western models of Development, Governance, Industrialization, Consumerism, Science, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Sachs, Planet Dialectics, 1999, p.xi.

advocating exploitative child labor or abuse.<sup>11</sup> Rather, we are seeking to highlight the fact that, in the last fifty years, in India, there has not been a serious assessment of schooling.<sup>12</sup> While we are inundated by rhetoric of how advantageous schooling is for the individual and for society, analyses on its harmful, destructive effects are conspicuously absent. By isolating schooling in a tower of goodness, we have effectively negated all other perspectives, understandings and conceptualizations of human learning.

In this critical analysis therefore, we hope to open up spaces for an insightful and balanced dialogue within the Campaign about the implications of constitutionally ratifying Education as a Fundamental Right. Not only will such a dialogue allow us to reflect on the detrimental effects of schooling (and its promise of Development) on society, but it will also enable us to rethink how we are utilizing our valuable time and resources.

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<sup>11</sup> Today's discourse on education places children in one of two categories: either in school (and therefore happily learning in order to succeed in life) or out-of-school (and therefore exploited as 'child labor' and deprived of a future). This either-or discourse fails to acknowledge the dehumanization in schooling or the possibilities of meaningful learning through work. At the same time, it does not criticize the economic, political, and social System that forces both children and adults into horrible working conditions in order to make a profit.

<sup>12</sup> Notably, in pre-Independent India, there were several critical assessments of schooling, made most emphatically by Gandhiji, Tagore, Aurobindo and J. Krishnamurti, among others.

# I. THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF SCHOOLING

## UNDERSTANDING THE MYTHS

Declaring schooling a fundamental right is justified by the campaigners on several different grounds. For one, schooling is said to increase every individual's life chances. Schools are presented as places that hone the capabilities of each child; they give knowledge in different areas (reading, writing, science, maths, art, socially useful productive work, etc.) to develop children's thinking power, creativity, self-esteem, skills, etc. Through schooling it is assumed that children will obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to acquire gainful employment to last their lifetimes. In this way, schooling is said to help the individual succeed on two levels: a) to explore one's psychological needs (i.e. for knowledge, creation, confidence, etc.) and b) to gain access to opportunities for sustaining one's physical needs (i.e. jobs which give money to buy food, clothing, shelter, etc.). Significantly, schooling promises everyone the same opportunity to increase their life chances. It is assumed to be a neutral and objective process, in which every individual is equal, is treated the same, and is evaluated by the same criteria (merit). One only needs to work hard to succeed in school to thereby maximize his/her life chances.

Second, schooling as a system is said to be of great benefit to society. In schools, the argument goes, children are taught to treat each other as equals. Schooling breaks down class barriers and brings diverse children together in the same space, encouraging tolerance and appreciation for differences. It also teaches children about societal norms, helping them grow up to be good citizens and good leaders. It is expected that only with the sensitivity and knowledge obtained in school are adults able to participate effectively in the democratic exercises of their countries.

Lastly, schooling is said to be an empowering process. It claims to cultivate in children a scientific temper that seeks and searches,

instead of foolishly accepting the superstitions prevailing in the 'ill-letterate' world. Exposed to a wide range of Scientific information and 'Truth' that would otherwise be inaccessible to them, children are better equipped as adults to understand and actively participate in the world around them. Such information is the key to transforming oppressive and discriminatory relationships in their communities.

But does schooling increase the life chances of each individual? Does it guarantee employment or a bright future? Does it eliminate inequalities and hierarchies? Does the information and process of schooling 'empower' one to challenge and change exploitative and unjust systems? By taking each of these promises/assumptions about schooling in turn, it becomes clear that all that glitters is not gold. Far from being a cure-all, schooling in fact produces, reinforces and expands the many socioeconomic ills that plague the world today. To call it a fundamental right ensures its *maya* and prevents it from being interrogated and unmasked as the dehumanizing and destructive force it is.

### UNMASKING THE MYTHS

#### Schooling Does Not Increase One's Life Chances

Far from developing children' thinking power, creativity, self-esteem, skills, etc., schooling stands as an obstacle to achieving one's full potential.<sup>13</sup> Schooling teaches confusion, emotional and intellectual dependency, and provisional self-esteem.<sup>14</sup> It promotes the view that all children are basically like clay or empty vessels and, through a system of rewards and punishments, can be conditioned to fit a

<sup>13</sup> Research on the brain (summarized in The Unfinished Revolution (2000)) has shown that culture of schooling (rewards, fear, control, etc.) goes against the 'grain of the brain'; it negates our evolutionary and biological predispositions in learning.

<sup>14</sup> In his book Dumbing Us Down (1992), John Gatto explains that 'provisional self-esteem' results from using grading systems and report cards to rank the potential of a child. "A monthly report, impressive in its provision, is sent into a student's home to elicit approval or mark exactly...how dissatisfied with the child a parent should be." These 'assessments' also help a child "to arrive at certain decisions about (himself) and (his) future" based on the "casual judgement of a strangers." p.10

standard mold. Schooling also cultivates a number of debilitating feelings within children: a mistrust of intimacy, a hate for solitude, a sense of cruelty and competition, a materialistic attitude, passiveness, timidity in the face of the unexpected, etc. Children acquire poor concentration skills and a poor sense of the past and the future in schools. This potent combination makes children indifferent to the adult world and to the future, indifferent to almost everything except the diversion of toys and violence.<sup>15</sup> Schooling's inculcation of psychological impotence and dependency suppresses and humiliates the inherent genius of children and "alienates them from their own human nature."<sup>16</sup>

Further, schooling ignores, negates, and demeans intelligences, knowledge systems, making-meaning systems, and learning styles that do not fit within its parameters. For example, a number of multiple intelligences have been identified by cognitive scientists/psychologists. These include intrapersonal, interpersonal, logical, spatial, natural, verbal, musical, kinesthetic, spiritual, emotional, creative, etc.<sup>17</sup> Yet, schooling denies the existence of all of these intelligences in each and every one of us. Furthermore, its emphasis on superficial info-knowledge — cramming us full of rote facts and mindless trivia — makes a mockery of what it means to be fully human.<sup>18</sup> Nor is there any real space for creativity, for local languages/expressions, nor for exploring a variety of relationships or other kinds of settings.

The culture of schooling drills into each child that there is only one definition of success — to make it to the top of the status-power-control ladder and dominate others. Of course, to get to the top,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.18-19.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> See Gardner (1999), Goleman (1995), Sternberg (1997) and Zohar & Marshall (2000) as examples.

<sup>18</sup> Rabindranath Tagore captured this dehumanizing mockery in "The Parrot's Training", a tale about a king who tries to Educate a parrot by trapping him in a golden cage, binding his feet with chains, clipping his wings, and then stuffing him full of books. Not surprisingly, the parrot dies.

one must compete. Pitching child against child, schooling reinforces the notion that life is a huge race against every other individual and if one wants to win, they better be ready to fight against and crush everybody else.<sup>19</sup> Via relentless grading, ranking and marking, year after year, schools label each child a “topper”, “average” or a “failure”. This labeling is done according to narrowly defined, externally-moderated and imposed criteria that do not take into account the unique capabilities of each child. Instead, schooling successfully instills in children a preference for and reliance on competition. It is a lesson that (not unintentionally) connects to the dominant economic model/Global Market, which thrives on the principles of cut-throat competition and hierarchy. The lesson continues long after one stops attending school, to pervade one’s understanding of living and interacting in society. Schooling thus succeeds in producing egotistical, competitive individuals, whose life patterns divide them from one another and weaken collaborative ways of relating.

### Schooling Does Not Guarantee Jobs or a Bright Future

Similarly, the promise of a job — much less a livelihood — is illusory. After trudging through years of schooling and spending ill-affordable money, most educated youth are either under-qualified for the employment they desire, or they are unable to find work in the degree-glutted labor market.<sup>20</sup> For example, in India, in 1993-94, the rate of unemployment in urban areas was 58.6% for schooled men and 72.5% for schooled women; the rate of unemployment in rural areas was 60.4% for schooled men and 57% for schooled women.<sup>21</sup> Not only are jobs being eliminated due to government and corporate down-sizing, but without a ‘jack’ or a ‘donation’ (i.e., influence or a bribe), a job is largely unattainable. And since

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<sup>19</sup> Alfie Kohn cogently describes this aspect of schooling in No Contest: The Case Against Competition, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> Unemployment among educated youth is a serious, well-documented problem in the developing world. For examples, see “A Matter of Quality”, “Once Incentives, Now Entitlements”, “The Pressure to Modernize and Globalize.”

<sup>21</sup> Statistics taken from Economic and Political Weekly, September 2000.

schooling has denied youth knowledge and practice of traditional livelihoods — or has conditioned them to believe that such activities were below them — they are left with few other options to sustain themselves.<sup>22</sup> Thus, for many, schooling has failed to deliver on the promise of 'better life chances.' In fact, the statistical and positive co-relation between education and employment/equity/poverty alleviation/health/democracy is seriously questionable in the face of grassroots realities. What is evident is that over the past 50 years, growing levels of school enrollment/completion have been accompanied by overall increases in inequality, unemployment, poverty, vulnerability (political, economic, social, physical).

### Schooling Does Not Eliminate Inequalities or Hierarchies

Far from fulfilling the promise of "building a free, just, and tolerant society," schooling actually encourages inequality, injustice, and exploitation.<sup>23</sup> It reinforces many of the oppressive structural aspects of society. In fact, the least children learn from school (irrespective of whether they go or not) is that they are not as good as other children who have more, in terms of money, power and status. It is a vicious cycle. Access to the Game and movement up the power-status-control ladder depends upon one's academic qualifications, which in turn depend upon the level of wealth and power one has to obtain those qualifications. The 'head start' is greatest for those who have paid the most for their academic degrees (i.e., those who attend elite schools and universities).<sup>24</sup> According

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<sup>22</sup> This alienation from work was one of Gandhiji's main criticisms against the British-style of education (See his essays in Towards New Education, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1995, fifth reprint.)

<sup>23</sup> A recent article in The Hindu (October 21, 2000) shows that this outcome of schooling is not limited to India. In Britain, the Oxbridge institution (Oxford and Cambridge Universities) has been accused of perpetuating class bias. Students are either selected on the basis of the elite secondary school they attended (for which one needs money) or on the basis of their alumni connection to the institution (for which one must have had money/class).

<sup>24</sup> A recent article in Outlook (December 2000), "Child is the Father of Mammon", describes how elite private schools have become the newest "mafia" in India, holding parents ransom by demanding donations of amounts anywhere from Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 5 lakhs, before granting children admission to their schools.

to Everett Reimer (1972), "While economic status is largely a function of the level at which a student drops out, power in society depends more upon the sorting that occurs when high school graduates enter college...State and local as well as national hierarchies are the products of the college lottery. Even international agencies are ruled by the graduates of a dozen world-famous universities."<sup>25</sup>

This type of segregation is also promoted at the international level. "Obligatory schooling... grades the nations of the world according to an international caste system. Countries are rated like castes, whose educational dignity is determined by the average years of schooling of its citizens, a rating which is closely related to per capita gross national product, and much more painful."<sup>26</sup> Thus, instead of ensuring tolerance, justice and humility, schooling actually promotes the segregation, oppression, and maintenance of the status quo.

### Schooling Does Not 'Empower' One to Challenge/Change the System

Today, empowerment is predominantly defined in terms of the amount of control and power one has to negotiate within the formal Market and State frameworks. Schooling promises to lead to the empowerment of the world's social majorities by increasing their capacity to collect resources to operate in these venues — be they monetary resources (income), technology, or info-knowledge. (Note: These are the only three resources recognized by the Market and State, and therefore are the only three desired today). The relationship between schooling and empowerment is as follows:

- (1) schooling helps one to acquire the resources demanded by the State and Market;
- (2) schooling therefore enables one to become part of the mainstream;
- (3) that being part of the mainstream/status quo is the same as being 'empowered'.

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<sup>25</sup> Everett Reimer, School Is Dead, 1972, p.10.

<sup>26</sup> Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society, 1970, p.3.

In convincing people that the way to Progress is to amass enough wealth, technology gimmicks, and knowledge (as defined by the System) in order to be part of the elite, schooling thus ensures that they uphold the status quo. When the 'four-fifths world' is indoctrinated with the myth that they too can be part of the 'one-fifth world'<sup>27</sup> if they go to school and work hard,<sup>28</sup> these products of schooling end up defending the very System that denies them freedom and lives of dignity. They become *economic units* instead of human beings, constantly striving to deliver their 'best', so as to more quickly scramble up the power-status-control ladder and join the ranks of the elite. The needs of the oppressive market economy and the greed of the North — for products, efficiency and constant consumer supply — are thereby unwittingly (and more than adequately) fulfilled by the prototype obedient 'worker-consumer-citizens' who never make it up the ladder.<sup>29</sup> In other words, schooling inculcates the view that economic productivity and consumption are the symbols of true Development and human beings are the means to this end (as 'commodities', 'resources' or 'capital'). The dehumanization continues further, as each human being is ascribed a label connoting different levels of 'knowledge' or 'competence', which in turn command different market values.

Unfortunately, these assumptions demonstrate just how schooling prevents individuals and collectives from really challenging and changing the macro-level System and its micro-level manifestations to create better worlds for humanity. Schooling cements the status

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<sup>27</sup> The world's peoples are divided by income distribution into five portions – the top 20%, the next 20%... Notably, the richest 20% of people in the world possess more than 80% of the world's income, while the poorest 20% have 1.4% of it. See David Korten, When Corporations Rule the World (1995) for more fascinating statistics of the massive injustice that is perpetuated in the world today.

<sup>28</sup> Ewens (1984) describes this as the illusion of meritocracy. Meritocracy says that schools provide opportunities for all to rise in society, and that inequalities in power, wealth, and status only exist because of an individual's own level of intelligence and industriousness. Therefore, 'failure' is the fault of the individual, not the System.

<sup>29</sup> John Gatto, in "The Public School Nightmare," (1996) outlines how such 'products' emerge from compulsory schooling.

quo and breeds a cynicism that 'things are the way they are' and eliminates both the creativity and the commitment necessary to explore other possibilities. It rarely fosters the hope and conviction that the world can be better and that we — whoever we are — have the power to make it so. In fact, education, as it exists in schools, breaks the spirit of both individuals and collectives. It renders them insecure, helpless and vulnerable, dependent on schooling and its partner institutions (the State, Market, etc.) and incapable of conceiving of other possible arrangements for learning and growing.

## INCREASING THE POTENCY OF THE MYTHS

### Devaluing Local Spaces and Resources

Not only does schooling fail to deliver on the promises it makes, but worse, it appropriates or devalues all other cultural, social, political and economic spaces and resources. By homogenizing diverse, local conceptualizations of living and organizing, it demeans or corrupts spaces that previously strengthened community bonds of interdependence. This adulteration of the local makes the myths more potent, because it eliminates the possibility of achieving the same goals (i.e., exploring one's full potential, ensuring a livelihood, attaining equality and justice, and challenging and changing the System) in other ways, through other relationships, and in other spaces.

For example, by restricting wisdom, meaning-making, and knowledge to only superficial 'info-knowledge' or 'G.K.', children are loaded with information utterly irrelevant to and often condescending of their social realities. Thus isolated from any other knowledge systems for dialogue, negotiation and understanding, outside of the curricular/conceptual framework of schooling (or quiz shows like *Kaun Banega Crorepati?*), children begin to look at their parents, neighbors, communities as 'backward', 'illiterate' and 'ignorant.' This arrogant attitude further leads them to look down upon traditional livelihoods and interdependent- and sustenance-oriented ways of living. In effectively removing these opportunities

for meeting one's physical needs and for relating to others in more cohesive and collaborative ways, schooling increases one's dependency on jobs and money, and therefore, on the government and market economy.

Efforts to promote pre-school and early childhood education<sup>30</sup> signify a further appropriation of spaces for building social bonds, values, relationships, knowledges, priorities, etc. The responsibility and venue for children's learning shifts from the home and surrounding locality to the confines of the school. Along with Media, schooling also eats into quality family time. Children now spend over six hours a day at school, then use the remainder of their waking hours to do homework and go for tuitions. Most dialogue between parents/adults and children is confined to issues related to school; other forms of interaction or relationship are rapidly disappearing. Even at play, one of the most popular games is "Teacher, Teacher", where the children imitate a classroom situation and test each other on math and other problems.<sup>31</sup> The school, in short, has permeated the daily life of the family and community, negating other valuable spaces for living and growing. This negation is all the more unfortunate because no single institution can support the vibrancy, diversity and interdependency of human beings.

In this way, not only does schooling fail to keep the promises it makes, but it also fundamentally undermines our individual and collective human dignity. From perpetuating competition and hierarchies, to instilling dehumanizing categories, to infecting our relationships and understandings of the Self and Community, schooling attacks the very essence of what it means to be human. Indeed, anything that calls itself 'compulsory' is anti-education,<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Early childhood education figured prominently in the 'Education For All' summit held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000.

<sup>31</sup> In fact, elements of the culture of schooling, such as competition and imitation, have infiltrated almost all the games that are popular among children today, like cricket, kabbadi, and leader-leader.

<sup>32</sup> Dayal Chandra Soni elaborates on 'compulsory schooling' in "The Ills of Our Present Education and Gandhian Basic Education as a Remedial Measure" (April 2000).

for it neither respects nor values a framework of human dignity. Rather, schooling successfully breeds conflict, injustice, hate, egoism, greed, and other qualities that deeply hinder our commitment to humanity and compassion for one another.

### Why 'Alternative'/'Non-formal' Schools Do Not Challenge the Myths

We anticipate that the first response to the above criticisms will be, "We see these problems, but we are advocating for good quality schools,<sup>33</sup> alternatives that will avoid the problems you describe and will succeed in making the 'myths' come true. That is what we are talking about when we call for Education to be a Fundamental Right." Indeed, for many, the 'alternative good quality school' or the 'non-formal school' card raises the stakes as the only hope for achieving the promises of schooling. But what must be recognized is that alternative/non-formal schooling does not differ substantially from mainstream schooling. Far from contesting the flaws inherent to the system of schooling, they persist in legitimizing the processes, relationships, goals, and values of the dominant model of schooling.

For example, the majority of alternative schools still:

- segregate children by age groups and from real life;
- perpetuate the myth of meritocracy, saying "everyone can succeed if they work hard";
- insist that learning occurs only within the space of school;
- impose a set curricular pattern and label it 'necessary' or 'basic';
- offer learners little autonomy in making decisions or governing their own learning;
- believe that teachers/facilitators have nothing to learn;
- see teachers as only those adult individuals who instruct in schools;
- do not believe that learning can happen without the guidance of an expert;

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<sup>33</sup> "Everyone talks these days about quality education for all. But quality education for every child, is an absurdity, a contradiction in terms. Most parents, when they say to S-schools, 'Give my kid a quality education', they mean, 'Do something to him that will get him ahead of all the other kids.' ... They mean, make him a winner in a race where most kids lose..." – John Holt, found on <[www.holtgws.com](http://www.holtgws.com)>.

- see knowledge as a commodity;
- endorse various measures of testing and competitiveness among students;
- define 'success' and 'progress' in terms of wealth, power, and status;
- isolate/negate the local to over-emphasize the global;
- do not critically question the hegemony of Development, Western Science, Nation-State, the 'Free Market'; and instead increase dependency on these exploitative structures/institutions.

Though this list is not exhaustive, it is illustrative of the various elements that compose the 'culture of schooling'. We must clarify that there is a difference between schools as physical places and schooling as a cultural framework. In theory, there is nothing wrong with the idea of different people coming together in a space to share ideas, create, discuss, learn, and grow. Unfortunately, a 'culture of schooling' prevents such a real learning process from occurring. Most importantly, these elements come in an all-or-nothing package. Although individual alternative schools may claim to not practice one (or even a few) of them, as long as they believe in even one element, then at some level, they are accomplices to all of them.

For example, in almost all 'alternative' initiatives, students are eventually mainstreamed back into the modern political, economic and social system whose violence inspired the so-called alternative. This expectation mandates there be a level of conformity between the Education offered by the alternatives and the Education offered by the mainstream. 'Alternatives' also continue the class-based segregation of mainstream schooling, falling into two categories: the expensive Woodstock and Doon Schools, which cater to wealthy, elite children; or the Shiksha Karmi/NFE village schools for 'poor', rural children. Both perpetuate the same oppressive and selective model of Development and Progress and then fail to deliver on the promises that education will bring this Success. In doing so, they violate human dignity on multiple levels.

The language used in current global discourse on education is similarly deceptive. Like 'alternative' schools, it too masks the fact that it is re-affirming the status quo of schooling. At first glance, the verbal changes seem to be considerable: schooling has been replaced by lifelong learning, students are now called learners, and schools are packaged as learning organizations. The linguistic effort apparently signals a shift from a quantitative to a qualitative dimension/focus. Yet, like 'alternative' schools, this word-play is also misleading. Though cutting-edge language and words have been co-opted, the depth of their meanings — and how they fundamentally challenge schooling — has been missed. In fact, the 'new' words continue to represent and function as the original terms; they delineate processes, actors, and spaces that remain consonant with the current culture of schooling and thus are a further attack on human dignity.

## II. THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF THE CAMPAIGN

By stressing that schooling be universalized, the Campaign for a Fundamental Right to Education in India seems to draw from the Education For All Campaign. Campaigning for Education to be a Fundamental Right is problematic for several reasons. First, it spreads and legitimates the violations of human dignity inherent to schooling. Ironically, it puts schooling into the same league as 'freedom of expression' and 'freedom of association', when schooling most often tramples on both of these freedoms. Second, it presumes that all Indians (and all people, for that matter) require a system of schooling in order to live with dignity. This assumption negates informal modes of learning, demeans contextually-sensitive conceptualizations of organizing life, and binds freedoms and choices. Implicit (and often explicit) in this claim is that parents, localities, or other learning resources and spaces, are not as good/ significant/meaningful as schooling. Thus, encroaching on or eliminating other spaces of learning is justified, because human beings are seen as incapable of learning without schools.

In addition to its content (or lack thereof), the Campaign mode itself is violent. By nature, a campaign is an aggressive, target-oriented and planned method of social action, designed to engage sections of society around a pre-defined issue. Campaigns involve mobilizing mass public support through slogans and rhetoric, usually emphasizing some idea of deprivation and/or injustice. They seek to force action from the State or a similar institution, by showing signs that the public is revolting out of disapproval of State motives or functioning and is demanding a certain action. In this way, campaigns contain a fair degree of militarism and self-righteousness. Typically, their assault on institutions is often directed by select groups of people for particular ends.

For example, a group of NGOs (Aga Khan Foundation, Bodh, CRY, ICICI, MV Foundation, National Foundation for India, National

Law School of India University, Pratham, PRIA, UNICEF) is steering the National Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education. The Campaign is trying to force the State to make education a fundamental right, by passing the 83<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Bill (now pending for a second reading in the Lok Sabha). To accomplish its goal, the NGOs are networking amongst each other and appealing in various parts of the country to gain more lobbyists for the Bill. The justification for the entire Campaign rests on the promises enshrined in schooling.

The aggressive nature of campaigning, however, produces several problems. First, it greatly restricts meaningful dialogue around the issue in question. Opportunities for deeply and critically inquiring into the rationale or implications of the demand are denied, with the claim that such processes would reduce the momentum needed to sustain public interest and support. Therefore, public contribution is limited to 'ticking the box' or 'signing the petition'; it rarely reaches the level of thinking about, questioning, and discussing the so-called 'injustice' at hand. The campaign is thus single-minded in its approach. Like a horse with blinders, it cannot see the road in the context of the landscape. Using propaganda to promote one vision as the only answer, it thus prevents the emergence of any other perspective on or understanding of the issue.

Limiting the space for dissent, questioning, or other conceptual frameworks guarantees that energy and resources will futilely and obstinately be invested in a particular direction. By focusing on the 'rights' aspect, the National Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education thus effectively diverts attention away from more foundational questions around schooling, education and society. When analyzing and discussing the problems of education, there is very little exploration of what purposes education serves and very little reflection on what has been achieved in these many decades. For example, it does not question the rising incidences of suicide and depression in Kerala, despite its esteemed status of having

achieved a literary status of 93%. Nor is there any discussion about why prevalent notions of education have failed; how education is connected to dominant notions of Development, Progress, Science/Technology, the Nation-State; who benefits from education and why; or any other seriously meaningful question. Not only is the landscape being ignored, but one wonders what lies at the end of the road.

Furthermore, while many documents<sup>34</sup> exude rhetoric about education achieving 'freedom, equality, justice and peace for all', there is no definition of — much less debate on — what these terms mean. It seems most partners of the Alliance feel no need to question them and instead are content to adhere to the 'universal' (read: Western elite) definitions. Similarly, although the education discourse today acknowledges the diversity inherent to life, the standardization and rigidity of its objectives and strategies suggest that mere lip service is being paid to complexity and context. Finally, the constant demands for augmenting resource allocations to education (elementary, higher, distance, etc.) do not address the query: Will there ever be enough resources? Expenses, and therefore resource needs, can be never-ending. We can simply keep raising the stakes, either with more schools, more levels, or more courses, manufacturing more "educational needs" to continuously request more resources. But even if somehow those resource needs could be met, the more important question is how would they solve the larger socioeconomic crises India is facing today?<sup>35</sup>

The oft-made counter-argument to this critique is that, "We are not ignoring these fundamental questions, but we can only address them after we achieve schooling for all." Or, "We do not need to a

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<sup>34</sup> We are referring directly to those documents of the Education For All Campaign, which are relevant, because we assume that the National Alliance in India is directly drawing from EFA to make similar rationalizations.

<sup>35</sup> Ivan Illich in Deschooling Society (1970) illustrates how the demand for resources are endless, and yet no amount of resources are able to penetrate or resolve the deep systemic problems inherent to schooling.

*priori* have a vision of Development or a conception of Progress to advocate schooling for all. It will *naturally* follow from universal schooling." For the Campaign to condescendingly carry out its strategies and assume that vision can be 'fixed' or decided later is like prescribing and force-feeding medicine to people who have not been diagnosed with any illness! It goes against the grain of common sense, to formulate action before weighing its consequences, by ignoring fundamental issues and not allowing space for adequate dialogue.

It also makes one wonder in what vacuum the Campaign advocates are living. To disregard the deeply significant connections between Schooling, Development, the Nation-State, Science, etc. is either a sign of naivete, or ignorance, or apathy, particularly given the large amount of debate and controversy surrounding these institutions. We need to think about their functions, relationships, the various contexts they operate in, their goals and purposes. We cannot continue to ignore or discard context without adequate reflection. To do so would further bind us to certain structures and limit our space for creative thought and action.

The shallowness and haste of such counter-arguments make suspect the roles and motives of the agents of the Campaign. Today, NGOs (now calling themselves Civil Society Organizations) claim they represent the masses, the social majorities, the 'people'. In this way, NGO participation at the round table satisfies the requirement of 'community involvement in decision-making and strategic planning of education.' But if the original problem was that the Government (as the so-called 'elected representatives of people') could not be trusted to focus on the real needs of people, then it is quite ironic that any non-governmental group is unquestioningly legitimate. NGOS, who expound their opinions under the banner 'of the people', are neither elected nor chosen in any way by the people they claim to serve/represent. How can they therefore be considered THE voice of the people?

It is even more ironic, given that the work/projects of most NGOs stem from contracts with the Government bodies or bilateral and multilateral donor institutions that aid and abet the very System that perpetrates oppression. Indeed, the majority of NGOs are service-agents that breed dependency on themselves, instead of being catalyzing agents that 'empower' people to be independent of the State and Market. The sector has emerged as its own industry — a powerful lobby that shapes its functioning according to which social agenda is the most lucrative. For example, it seems that many of the NGOs involved in the Campaign do not care about/believe in it, much less understand the depth of its implications.<sup>36</sup> It makes us wonder if they have simply become signatories to the Campaign to pacify their donors.

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<sup>36</sup> This observation is based on several meetings we have had with people working with various NGOs on the Campaign.

### III. IF SCHOOLING AND THE CAMPAIGN ARE SO PROBLEMATIC, WHY ARE THEY BEING PUSHED? IMPLICATIONS OF DECLARING EDUCATION A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

If we can agree, even partially, on the above problems of schooling and the campaign mode, then a simple question naturally follows: Why the desire to see it declared a fundamental right? To answer this, we must recognize who benefits from the expansion of schooling.

Education today is a Big Business, one from which the corporate, government, donor, media, and NGO-sectors all stand to profit. For example, the guidelines for the content of education laid out in The Integrated Framework on Education for Peace, Democracy and Human Rights (1995) suggest that:

“It is necessary to introduce into curricula, at all levels, true education for citizenship which includes an international dimension... It would be desirable for the documents of UNESCO and other United Nations institutions to be widely distributed and used in educational establishments, especially in countries where the production of teaching materials is proving slow owing to economic difficulties.”<sup>37</sup>

Who will benefit from this worldwide distribution of textbook and curricular material is obvious. It is worth billions of dollars for the companies of the North, who will write, copyright, print, and distribute the materials that will explain to our children what ‘true education for citizenship’ is. It will also mean submerging and thereby eliminating the indigenous curricular materials production in countries, such that educational content reflects a Northern-bias (often hidden propaganda) instead of a contextual base.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, 1995, p.11.

<sup>38</sup> Of course, it should be noted that the majority of indigenous curricular materials reflect the elite-bias of their countries.

In India itself, the education sector consumes thousands of crores of rupees every year. Doing a few back-of-the-envelope calculations, we see that, in one school year, the total market for uniforms is Rs. 3000 crores and for stationary is Rs. 3000 crores.<sup>39</sup> Add to this the costs of school construction, school furniture, supplies, textbooks, not to mention teacher and administrative staff salaries and training, and it is clear that the business of schooling is a mammoth enterprise.

The astute reader might ask, "But why declare education a fundamental right? So long as the Education System is in place, won't these sectors (State, Market, NGO, etc.) still make their profits? Why should we care if they are pushing schooling as a 'human right'? What difference does it make?" This question gets to the crux of the problem. When education is ratified in the Constitution as a fundamental right, the State will be forced to increase the level of public subsidies it provides for the sector. This increase will require a reduction in spending in other social sectors, an increase in common taxes, and most importantly, the taking out of more international loans. Further, in light of the above analysis of the State-Market-NGO nexus, it is clear that these public subsidies will mostly fill the coffers of private corporations and NGOs. The private sector will make more profit in those countries whose governments cannot deliver on the Fundamental Right, as there will be pressure on them to open up their domestic Education market to foreign companies to provide the 'necessary services' (read: more globalization). And when every child must be enrolled in schools, individual families and communities will also be forced to increase their spending in this area. In these ways, the Education Business will be ensured generations of profit.

There are other, more subtle, implications of declaring education a fundamental right: First, schooling is portrayed to be universal phenomenon, which consequently cements a call for 'global equality'

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<sup>39</sup> The calculations were done as follows: Rs.200 (average cost of uniforms per year) X 150 million (number of children in school system) = Rs. 30,00,00,00,000; Rs. 200 (average cost of stationary per year) X 150 million = Rs. 30,00,00,00,000

in education'. Second, such a declaration legitimates and further entrenches a particular vision of Globalization and Development, and therefore an entire framework of rights, property, consumption, production, relationships, values, etc. Thirdly, it opens the door to international 'judgement and enforcement'. Examining each of these outcomes in turn makes it clear the implications of the Campaign are severe and must be challenged.

### THE GUISE OF UNIVERSALISM

To call something a 'Fundamental Right' suggests that it is universal — a characteristic/value/belief that all human beings share, within and across various cultural, linguistic, national, ethnic, racial, gender boundaries, and for all generations, past, present and future. The problem with universalism is not so much that it seeks out commonalities among human beings (which may indeed be many) but that it presents these as unquestionable absolutes in which all peoples must fit themselves. Whether arising from a fear of difference or from a desire to unify all humankind, such universalizing leaves little room for diversity, complexity, conflict, creativity, and dialogue around serious questions about what it means to be human or how we conceptualize reality.<sup>40</sup> Thus, universalism posits the belief that everybody wants the same kind of life and needs the same kind and amount of resources to exist, thrive and be at peace.

When Education is presented as a universal, it can 'legitimately' eliminate the diversity of learning contexts and homogenize all individuals and collectives into one dominant model or vision of schooling. While Education For All at least made superficial commitments to the diversity and plurality of humankind and its conceptions of education, the National Alliance for Fundamental Right to Education wears no such mask. It categorically states

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<sup>40</sup> In Development Betrayed: the end of progress and a coevolutionary revisioning of the future, Richard Norgaard extends this critique of universalism by explaining that it may hold true for basic physical processes like thermodynamics, but that it is useless for trying to understand complex systems.

that “factors impeding universalisation of elementary education are more social, political and cultural in nature.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, peoples’ beautiful and rich differences are a problem, because they stand in the way of making one institution fit for all! But instead of recognizing that universalism is impossible in a climate of human diversity, the Alliance emphasizes large-scale replicable work. They further suggest a standardization of pedagogical techniques to ensure quality and equality of education in India — irrespective of contexts, languages, or communities.

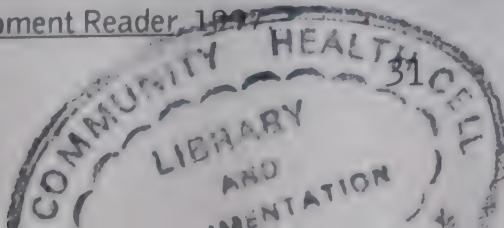
In this way, the Alliance continues the assault of those modern Indian leaders who called for “Unity in Diversity” — a slogan that, more often than not, has killed diversity and replaced it with a superficial, chest-beating patriotism. It seems the North’s advocates for ‘universal equality’ are threatened by the pluri-verse. They do not acknowledge that differences in abilities, desires, conceptualizations of life and living, cultures and knowledge systems can (and do) naturally co-exist, are constantly changing and must be respected.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, their hesitation and dismissal of diversity is understandable. Acknowledging diversity among human beings would mean handing over the reins of power and understanding, as well as the construction of relationships and commerce, to the world’s social majorities. Not only are the people not trusted to know what is ‘good’ for themselves, but most likely, their locally-determined value systems would erode the massive orchestrations of power and control (as seen in Development, Globalization, Human Rights, Progress, Science and Technology) amassed, reinforced, and perpetuated by the North.

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in “Frequently Asked Questions on the Fundamental Right to Education,” National Alliance for the Fundamental Right to Education, August 1998.

<sup>42</sup> G. Esteva and M. Prakash, “From Global Thinking to Local Thinking,” in The Post-Development Reader.



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## How UNIVERSAL EQUALITY JUSTIFIES GLOBALIZATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND OTHER FORMS OF PROGRESS

The moral mask of 'equality' is the most insidious aspect of universalism. When 'equality' is taken to mean that every human being is basically the same — much like cloned products packaged in a factory — it unleashes the agenda of homogenization. The most obvious example of this 'sameness' is destruction of languages the world over, where it is expected that "as many as 90 per cent of the world's total languages (between 3600 and 5400) are threatened with extinction in the next century."<sup>43</sup> Not only does this version of 'equality' prevent any reflection on what might be other definitions of equality — such as promoting and respecting diversity, or eliminating hierarchies and exploitation, etc. — but it also leads to a prescription. If all people share a common set of universal human rights and are thus 'equal', they must all have *equal* access to resources, so they will have *equal/opportunity* to become 'developed' (like the United States). In the Campaign's context, the crucial resource one needs access to is schooling.

As stated earlier, Education promises Progress and an enhancement of one's life chances, so that eventually we all (individuals and nations) will equally achieve Development. Universalism re-affirms the path paved by the North; it re-echoes the idea it is desirable and possible for us Developing countries to obtain the monetary (and therefore political) power and 'standard of living' that our so-called Developed Big Brothers have. Indeed, we have 'equal right' to it! The universal messiahs of humankind — Science and Technology — will again nurture our faith that Progress is possible for an infinite number of people, and there will be a day when all developing countries will be able to control their destinies and actively partake in the power regime. In thus uplifting the values of Science (objectivity, neutrality, rationality, logic, detachment, verifiability, evidence, efficiency, fragmentation into parts, predictability,

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<sup>43</sup> Steven Pinker, The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language, 1994, p. 259.

substitutability, standardization, arrogance, manipulation, hierarchy, competition, isolation, etc.), universalism finds another angle by which to reject diversity, complexity, compassion, conscience, morality, collectives/communities, etc.

Education is intricately linked into these myths, as well as the overall framework of Globalization and Development. The earlier section (describing the problems with schooling) demonstrated this clearly.<sup>44</sup> But when schooling is declared a fundamental right, it has further justification for ascribing to and perpetuating this dominant egocentric, obsessive and exploitative model. Again, the National Alliance states this plainly: It will not work in a “manner that may undermine, nationally or internationally, the gains of the last fifty years and the long history of social reform and struggle for self-reliance (in India)” and simultaneously seeks to “make sure that ALL children are in school and learning”.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Education’s role in perpetuating this model of Development is duly noted. It ensures that a perpetual supply of ‘educated’ people will obey orders, reaffirm the status quo, and continue along the same path of Progress.

When such Development-Equality is considered an inherent human right, and Education is seen as the primary precondition to it, then the Campaign advocates find themselves on a moral high-ground — with a moral obligation — to ensure access to schooling for everyone. The Right to Education thus becomes a Holy Grail, an altruistic battle being waged ‘for the good of the people.’ That other ways of living may be desired, that education may not lead to the Development of All, and that Universal Human Rights may contain hidden agendas, are all possibilities conveniently overlooked by the moral soldiers of the Campaign.

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<sup>44</sup> For additional understanding on this linkage between Education and Development, see “The Trouble with Knowledge” by Munir Fasheh, in Expo 2000: A Global Dialogue on “Building Learning Societies”, Hanover, Germany, September 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in “Frequently Asked Questions on the Fundamental Right to Education,” National Alliance for the Fundamental Right to Education, August 1998.

In this way, the mythical promise of 'universal equality' naturally enhances the current mantra of Globalization and adds new fire to the flailing cause of Development. The need to portray a link between globalization and a global framework of human rights is fairly self-explanatory. It feeds well into the rhetoric of the 'global village': if we are all engaged in the 'global enterprise of a common and connected humanity, a shared destiny' — if we are the 'same' — then we have the same desires and we therefore share (and need) the same set of human rights. Thus, the universal equality embedded in the Human Rights framework provides an adequate 'moral out' for the destructiveness of Globalization and Development; if they are acting "for the good of the people", then they are legitimized as being the best. If they are the best, then how can they be criticized or dismantled?

### MAKE WAY FOR THE 'ENFORCERS'

Not surprisingly, the State-Market-NGO-Academic nexus formulates not only what are human rights and why, but also what constitutes Globalization and Development. Again, not surprisingly, "the authentic universal subject who determines what qualifies as knowledge, [who is] the exerciser of reason, was always masculine, European, [or white American], heterosexual and [rich, upper] middle class (or, to put it another way, was always NOT female, non-European, queer or poor)."<sup>46</sup> In other words, a select elite minority wields the power and control to make decisions for the good of the world's marginalized majorities. But not only do they get to decide what constitutes a 'Human Right' or Development, they also get to enforce it.

In terms of education, this means the same State-Market-NGO-Academia institutions that are pushing for Education as a Fundamental Right are those benefiting from it and are those who

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<sup>46</sup> Dianne Otto, "Everything is Dangerous: Some Post-Structural Tools for Rethinking the Universal Knowledge Claims of Human Rights Law", Australian Journal of Human Rights, [www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/ahric/ajhr/v5n1/ajhr511.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/ahric/ajhr/v5n1/ajhr511.html)

will 'enforce' it. An example of this insidious-ness (or ludicrousness) is that the body primarily responsible for guaranteeing Education as a Fundamental Right is a major member/profiteer of this nexus — the State. Declaring schooling a Fundamental Right will actually increase the power and autonomy of the State over local communities. Spaces for independent choice and resistance will be usurped as schooling will become compulsory, and unschooling<sup>47</sup> will be seen as a legal violation of children's rights. Further, in a globalized, liberalized, and privatized economy, it is evident that the State often acts in consensus with the whims of the Market vis-à-vis the powerful lobbying of business interest groups. Academia and NGOs benefit in the mix as the sources of legitimacy and delivery. What ARE we talking about then? That the definers, beneficiaries and enforcers of the Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education all belong to the same small global elite!

Let us give a fictional (although highly possible) example of how this dangerous nexus works: The next campaign may call for an "eradication of the digital divide", when computers are deemed by Western-style academics and government officials to be the best means of learning, accessing the world, gaining exposure, etc. In the interest of 'equality', then the campaign will claim that everyone has a 'fundamental right to a computer' and must be provided with one. The State should therefore subsidize this provision with public money, since the equipment/technology will be outside the purchasing power of the majorities. But who will the State purchase this equipment from? And who will ensure that the majorities learn to use the computer, under the government's 'Total Computer Campaign'? Declaring a 'right to computer' obviously benefits the Market and NGOs. It allows them to further entrench themselves as indisputable, immovable institutions and reinforces peoples' dependency upon them. Countries will be pressured to provide

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<sup>47</sup> Parents are said to be unschooling when they choose to resist schooling by not sending their children to school. Rather than expose them to its destructive indoctrination, they and their children take conscious charge over their individual and collective learning agendas.

'Computers for All', and those who do not comply will face sanctions and be considered violators of Human Rights.

When an extremely select group of people enforce a universal standard of rights, they impose on humankind a set of criteria for defining itself. Worse, they inflict 'punishments' on those who fail to comply. On an international level, sanctions and 'peacekeeping forces' are called in on countries; while nationally, governments use their military forces (CISF, BSF, Army) to 'persuade' non-compliant provinces/states. To violently enforce a narrow understanding of human dignity is itself a violation of human dignity. It leaves no space for dialoguing about other conceptualizations of existence and organization, and, ironically, undermines the innate freedom of people to live and organize as they desire or deem appropriate.

## CONCLUSION: FROM FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS TO HUMAN DIGNITY

The very use of the word 'right' today connotes indignant liberation from bondage and injustice, from deprivation and slavery. But whom are we being liberated from? In the dominant perception of Human Rights, individuals and collectives need protection from the State, Market, or other dehumanizing Forces that trample upon their freedoms. Yet, ironically, they demand this protection from the same institutions. They fail to see that without challenging the assumptions, relationships, processes, values, etc. that are at the root of these institutions, infringements upon their human dignity will continue to occur for they are inherent to the institutions themselves.

For example, the Campaign is drawing from larger international conceptualizations (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Education For All Campaign, Human Development Reports) and claiming that the State is inhibiting peoples' right to education by not providing it. Yet at the same time, it is looking to the State to ratify and ensure this right. It fails to see that what the State has done (in conjunction with the Market, Media, NGOs) is create, perpetuate, and reinforce an Education System that denies our human dignity and prevents us from deciding what education means, how we would organize learning, etc. In other words, it eliminates the processes of conceptualization, dialogue, action, and reflection that might be considered crucial to any real 'right' to education.

The larger problem is that this approach ignores the nexus, agenda, and vision of Development that comes with demanding 'education as a human right'. This should bother us for at least three reasons: First, adhering to a framework of Human Rights fails to recognize the problems inherent to this perspective of Development and Education (as mentioned earlier). Second, it masks the manipulative

power of the State-Market-NGO nexus and their agenda. We neither question the fundamental assumptions underlying these institutions, nor do we recognize how they shift their message (and their language) to make themselves appear politically or morally correct. For example, we have gone from colonialism to globalization, from students to learners, and from 'education for a select few' to 'learning for all'. But fundamentally, the fabric of these terms has not changed, and so it is not surprising that neither injustice nor oppression has disappeared.

Third, assuming universality and universal applicability of this perspective negates the existence and relevance of all other frameworks of understanding human dignity and the protection of this dignity. For example, there are frameworks that do not support or complement the conceptions of 'equality' and 'justice' that underlie Human Rights. And most 'non-liberal' conceptions give ideological and practical priority to the community over the individual.<sup>48</sup> Yet, there is no space for these other understandings to live or grow, much less sustain themselves, in the face of this dominant perspective.

What is needed is a shift from 'fundamental rights' to 'human dignity'. This is not to engage in the same kind of 'word-play' by saying that conceptions of human dignity are or will be universal. Instead, it means opening up the spaces and opportunities to discuss, articulate, interpret, and reflect on *what it means to be human*. Such processes are crucial for undermining the moral high ground the Human Rights (and the Development that goes with it) stands upon, for unmasking the agenda of the Nexus, and for liberating ourselves from "tanks, banks, and other structures of control."<sup>49</sup> Uncovering/recovering different senses of human dignity means opening ourselves up to unlearning and relearning new ways of

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<sup>48</sup> Jack Donnelly, Universal Human Rights In Theory and Practice, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

<sup>49</sup> See Munir Fasheh's "My Mother vs. the US Congress".

negotiating power, of self-organizing,<sup>50</sup> and of having faith in our own abilities as individuals and collectives.

Instead of ensuring that every child will be forced to go through the rigorous torture of schooling, we humbly suggest the National Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education might re-invent itself. To begin to do this, we encourage those involved with the Campaign to seriously initiate dialogues around questions like:

- What is the meaning of a 'fundamental right' and how does it relate to conceptions of human dignity?
- Similarly, what do we mean by terms like Development, Progress, Science and Technology, Democracy, Equality, etc.? Who benefits and who loses from current mainstream definitions of these terms?
- What are the broader principles of education that can uphold human dignity? Who should frame them, for whom, and how? What roles and responsibilities should the State, Market, NGOs, communities, and individuals have?
- What are the diverse learning spaces, roles, relationships, and processes that allow us to nurture our human dignity, both at individual and collective levels?

We submit these questions and this article in the hopes to initiate conversations about the possibilities that are open to us, when we together explore deeper foundational questions about education, learning, development, progress, human rights, etc<sup>51</sup>. For the

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<sup>50</sup> Self-organizing contrasts with externally-imposed, mechanical planning. "Self-organizing systems create their own structures, patterns of behavior, and processes for accomplishing (their goals). They agree on behavior, relationships that make sense to them." From M. Wheatley and M. Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996.

<sup>51</sup> The Yashpal Committee (1993) Report, 'Learning Without Burden', in its

dialogues around these questions to be meaningful, they should stem from our own personal experiences and expressions, rather than being dictated from above by institutions. We hope you will draw inspiration to pause, reflect and share (as we have) from Theodore Zeldin, who wrote in Conversation (2000):

*"Conversation is not just about conveying information or sharing emotions, not just a way of putting ideas into peoples' heads... Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards."*

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recommendations, emphasises, "a major problem is connected with the notions of "knowledge explosion" and the "catching up" syndrome. We believe that these problems cannot be fully addressed through easily manageable administrative actions. They need wider discussions because they are centrally connected with images of our civilisation, self-esteem and societal goals. Such a wide discussion can come about through the publication of this report and through a set of seminars, meetings and media discussions."

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Notes

## SHIKSHANTAR:

The Peoples' Institute for Rethinking Education and Development  
Shikshantar, a not-for-profit movement, was founded to challenge the monopoly of schooling, which today inhibits many diverse forms of human learning and expression, as well as organic processes towards just societal regeneration. We are committed to creating spaces where individuals and organizations can together engage in a dialogue to: (1) generate meaningful critiques to expose and transform existing models of education and development, and (2) elaborate (and continually re-elaborate) complex shared visions and practices of lifelong societal learning for *Swaraj* in South Asia.

Shikshantar is based in Udaipur (Rajasthan, India). Our core team works in collaboration with local, state, national and international partners through a dynamic process of 'research for action'. To learn more, or to find out how to join our efforts, please contact us at:

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We welcome and encourage your reactions, questions, suggestions & support.